

OBITUARY

EDGAR DELL

Born: 28 November 1901

Died: 18 April 2008



Edgar Dell photo taken ca. 1972.

Edgar Dell was born in London on 28 November 1901, the third of four children to Edwin William Dell and Emily Blanche (nee Rossner) Dell. To put this time in perspective it is worth noting that Queen Victoria had died only a few months before. People's ability to fly didn't happen until nearly three years later with the first flight by the Wright brothers.

Edgar's maternal grandfather was Carl Rossner who moved to England from Hanover, Germany and worked for the family of Isaac Merritt Singer, the inventor of the sewing machine. Carl

Rossner was a gifted artist and among other things painted the ceiling of the Ball Room in Buckingham Palace for Prince Albert and Queen Victoria. Other examples of Carl Rossner's artwork are the ornate ceilings in Singer's Oldway Mansion in Paignton, Devon.

Edgar's mother had a fondness for the arts including Shakespeare, and she played the piano at home. One of Edgar's favourite pieces of music was Chopin's Opus 10, Etude No 3 in E major, which his mother often played.

The world that Edgar lived in as a young boy was both rich in

botanical knowledge as well as in the arts. He grew up surrounded by plants as his father was a nurseryman who managed his own business, primarily responsible for the bedding plants, shrubs and trees of many private estates in London. The botanical and horticultural knowledge were to stand him in good stead in his early adulthood. Not only did he have the whole nursery as a back-yard as a boy, but also Golder's Green and Hampstead Heath were within walking distance and together with the Smith boys he and his brother Robert regularly visited these areas and made them their own.

Edgar attended a public school where the classrooms were mixed boys and girls. However, unlike today, the girls entered from one side of the room, the boys from the other and the playgrounds were partitioned on two sides of the classrooms so the sexes could not meet. Edgar graduated from school at the age of 14, one year after the start of World War I. The War was to have drastic consequences on his father's business which never recovered.

After the War, Edgar became an assistant draftsman, working for a large firm in central London by day and attending paid night classes in drawing. His teacher was Mr Ernest Dudley Heath, an accomplished painter, who became principal of the Hampstead Garden Suburb School of Arts and Crafts. Interestingly, he always signed

his artwork as Dudley Heath and Edgar took his advice to only use two names, and never used his middle name, Hope, in any of his artwork signatures.

To order to save money to further his art career, Edgar travelled to Canada and worked on a wheat farm in the prairies, for a summer and autumn, before returning to London and attending another year of night schooling. He then saw advertised a call for workers in Western Australia. However, unlike the Canadian scheme where the Canadian Government paid the sea fare both ways and the railway fare to the point of pickup by the farmer, the Australian scheme was quite miserable in that the traveler had to pay his fare back from the wages he earned. Consequently, Edgar arrived in Australia in debt.

The week that Edgar was due to sail from England, he was approached by Curtis Botanical Magazine to become an illustrator but felt he had to decline as he had already committed himself to the shipping company. This trait of not being able to make the best decision for himself, in due consideration of others, was to haunt him for the rest of his life.

As it was, Edgar parted without saying goodbye to his Mother and Father, nor to his sisters who he loved dearly, because he knew he was returning, but it was never to be...and the remorse for never seeing his family again stood heavily on his conscience, especially in the latter years of his life.

The ship carrying Edgar to his selected destination in Australia could not dock at Fremantle due to storms and carried onto Melbourne. After several days he was able to get a ship back to Fremantle and arrived to a wharf with farmers looking for workers and commercial touts wanting to make a quid. One of the latter convinced Edgar that Australia was a dangerous place and to survive he needed to buy a special snake kit at what must have been an exorbitant price, which he duly purchased! In the queue for work, he was first offered a job on a farm in Grasspatch, which he quite liked the possibility because the name sounded horticultural. However, he ended up letting someone else take this job and settled for

working on an orchard in Bickley in the hills near Carmel. This was 1924. Shortly after this, he formed a lifelong friendship with the ornithologist Will Loaring. This unfortunately ended with Will's death in February 1968.

In the late 1920's Edgar, on advice from the Agricultural Bank, purchased an old timber mill site consisting of about 40 acres in the bush in Paull's Valley near Mundaring Weir to start his own orchard. The timber mill was owned by Port and Honey and operated from about 1907 to 1913 when it closed as timber ran out. As children, we were used to finding pieces of the old wooden tramways and metal objects from that time. Apparently the mill had been established there due to a fresh-water spring. Driving



Photo taken in 1992 while visiting England at age of 91.

through the forest to Mundaring Weir it is now hard to imagine that horse-drawn wagons once hauled the sawn timber to the railhead at Mundaring Weir.

Edgar married Elneth Maureen O'Neil on 24 June 1935 and had five sons and two daughters and 15 grandchildren and at the time of his death had 19 great-grandchildren.

Edgar began a fruitful botanical partnership with Charles Gardner who had joined the Department of Agriculture as an assistant to W.M. Carne in the same year that Edgar arrived in WA. In 1926, Gardner succeeded Carne as economic botanist and plant pathologist and became Government Botanist and curator of the State's Herbarium in 1929. Edgar began utilising his artistic skills and started painting Western Australian wildflowers during the early 1930's. They were painted for West Australian Newspapers Ltd, who published one a week as a colour supplement to the Western Mail with a botanical description by Charles Gardner. These watercolour paintings proved so popular that West Australian Newspapers Ltd published them in book form in 1935 titled 'West Australian Wildflowers'.

This book was immensely popular and began to introduce thousands of Western Australians and tourists alike to the spectacular beauty of our wildflowers and helped greatly in increasing awareness and the need for their preservation. Its

popularity was demonstrated by the fact that it was reprinted seven times, (in 1938, 1941, 1943, 1945, 1947, 1950 and 1951).

In 1958 this book was revised and enlarged to accommodate 80 of Edgar Dell's watercolours and with an expanded text by Charles Gardner. This book became the major reference book on WA's wildflowers for many years. This book was again revised for a completely new edition in the early 1970's as 'Wildflowers of Western Australia' and was reprinted a number of times.

A second book titled "Poison Plants of South-western Australia" was published in 1937. This was hugely important for the pastoral industry in identifying those plants that were responsible for large numbers of stock deaths. Paintings from this book were included in the major hard cover book "The Toxic Plants of Western Australia" by C.A. Gardner and H.W. Bennetts in 1956.

Life was incredibly hard during the Great Depression and income from the paintings was meagre. To supplement his income Edgar began cutting jarrah timber in the forest to be used in the Number 1 wood-fired pumping station on the Mundaring Weir to Kalgoorlie waterpipe. This often necessitated him camping out in the forest in makeshift camps often in atrocious weather especially in winter. Anyone who has worked with jarrah knows just how hard this timber cutting would have



Billardiera floribunda



Gastrolobium capitatum



Calytrix fraseri



Isopogon dubius

been. There were no mechanical saws – the trees were felled with axes and crosscut saws and the logs cut into either 3 foot or 6 foot lengths before being split with metal hammers and wedges into separate billets and transported to Mundaring Weir or other transport depots. Later, during World War II, Edgar was manpowered for timber cutting – his health did not allow him selection for active duty overseas.

During this time, Edgar developed his orchard by hand clearing the massive trees and ploughing the land with horses before planting fruit trees (oranges, mandarins, grapefruit, pears, cherries, apricots, peaches, plums and nectarines). Eventually, in 1951, Edgar purchased a little grey Fergie TEA-20 tractor to make the ploughing and cultivation faster and easier. Edgar always kept poultry for eggs and had a range of breeds of different colours including the speckled Plymouth Rocks, Rhode Island Reds, black Australorps and the aggressive white and black Sussex. Poultry were becoming increasingly popular and Edgar built a number of sheds to house the egg-laying hens and the meat-producing broiler chickens. Eggs were sold to the egg board but the live broilers all had to be crated up and transported by truck to processors in Perth. Edgar was the first farmer in Western Australia to grow sweetcorn commercially and other growers copied and a new industry had begun.

Edgar used to go to the kerbside markets and later the auction markets in Perth, leaving home about 4 am. Produce was taken on an old Fargo truck and later on a Morris truck. The latter had doors, which kept out the cold air. The children would ride on the back perched high on the jute bags of poultry food, enjoying the view.

Flowers especially daffodils and chrysanthemums became a major love of Edgar as he got older as these he could manage without the use of machinery. He often walked the 10 km into Kalamunda pushing a wheelbarrow of chrysanthemums or daffodils when he was in his 80's, parked the wheelbarrow, and loaded the bundles of flowers on the bus to take to florists in Perth.

Edgar was always an avid reader and loved books. Throughout his life he would often use well-chosen quotes to reinforce his views. To him the original always had to be of prime importance. Modifications or popular versions should be shunned. For example, "My Fair Lady" should never be preferred to George Bernard Shaw's original "Pygmalion". Because of his wide knowledge and interests, especially in botany, he encouraged study and was immensely proud when his two youngest children were admitted to university the same year to study science.

During the late 70's and continuing through the 1980's Edgar became progressively blind

because of cataracts. However, modern surgery was moving ahead in leaps and bounds and he was able to have both eyes operated on which restored almost perfect vision. How little he had been able to see, especially seeing his children grow older, was revealed with his startling comment to one of his sons who was the first to visit him after the operation. "Goodness how old you look"! Having regained his eyesight meant that he could now do things he had not attempted before. For instance he had not flown in an aircraft since shortly after World War I. In 1992 at the age of 91 he flew to England to see his older brother, Robert, who he hadn't seen for about 68 years. Robert had worked for the London Passenger Transport Board and its successors between the ages of 16 and 70, and was Signal Engineer responsible for the entire department from 1941.

For someone born before people's ability to fly it is not surprising that Edgar had difficulty in accepting some changes especially in technology and he mistrusted many appliances convinced that radio waves might impact on the human brain. One of the newspaper clippings he kept was – Today's thought: To err is human, but to really foul things up requires a computer – Paul Ehlich. In contrast, however, he strongly advocated using the newest varieties of fruit and flowers because of market advantage.

Edgar's last years were marked by increasing frustration at not



ABOVE: Edgar Dell aged 104 with his daughter Marjory.



LEFT: Visiting his older brother Robert in 1992.

being able to physically attend to his thousands of daffodils that he grew for supply to florists. However with family help in planting he remained optimistic and even at the age of 101 imported more bulbs from Melbourne to expand his business! He continued to pick daffodils until he was 103. He preferred to use first one, then two garden forks in preference to a walking stick when outside. Later, in 2005, as he became more frail he transferred to Sunshine Hostel in Lesmurdie, but he still hoped he might be able to return to his beloved flowers.

Only a week before his death he was suggesting that another bore and windmill should be organized to ensure sufficient

water was available to overcome the effects of climate change. His final two days were affected by pneumonia and he passed away peacefully in Swan Districts Hospital about 2pm on 18 April 2008 aged 106 and 4 months.

Other biographical information on Edgar Dell is available in:

Carol Mansfield (1997), 'Edgar Dell, A Singular Talent', *Australian Garden History*, Vol 9, No.2, Sept–Oct 1997 pp. 6–8.

Keighery, G. (2008). 'Edgar Dell: November 28th 1901–April 18th 2008'. *Australian Systematic Botany Society Newsletter* 135, pp. 11–13.

– JOHN DELL and
BERNARD DELL